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E.O. 12958: N/A
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SUBJECT: ARGENTINA BACKS OFF BOTNIA PROTEST

REF: 08 BUENOS AIRES 1717

¶1. (SBU) Summary: After allowing protesters to block the main bridge between Argentina and Uruguay for over two years, the Government of Argentina has reversed course and begun to express opposition to the protest. The Kirchner-allied governor of Entre Rios in December made headlines by conceding that there was no evidence that the Botnia paper plant in Uruguay was polluting the river or air, ostensibly the original cause for the protest. The governor's statements were quickly backed up by several GOA officials, culminating with former president Nestor Kirchner's revisionist statement that he and his government had never supported the roadblocks. The bridge at Gualeguaychu remains blocked, however, as the GOA appears inclined to use moral suasion rather than force to disperse the protesters who, for the time being, remain camped on the bridge. Speculation is that the GOA's reversal may be a belated effort to win GOU support for Nestor Kirchner's bid to lead UNASUR. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Over two years after Argentines living in Gualeguaychu, Entre Rios, shut down the main bridge between Argentina and Uruguay ostensibly to protest the construction of a paper mill on the Uruguayan side of the river that separates the two nations, the Government of Argentina has begun to express opposition to the protest. In December, the Kirchner-allied governor of Entre Rios, Sergio Urribarri, publicly acknowledged there was no evidence that the Finnish-owned Botnia paper mill in Uruguay, over a year after it had begun operating, was contaminating the air or water beyond acceptable levels. Urribarri also questioned the effectiveness of the protest, noting that cutting off bridge traffic had not impeded the Botnia plant's construction nor the commencement of its operations. He said the protest had, however, hurt the Gualeguaychu and Entre Rios economies.

¶3. (SBU) Although leaders of the dwindling protest objected to Urribarri's statements, GOA Cabinet Chief Sergio Massa publicly weighed in January 2, backing up Urribarri and noting the protest had outlived its purpose. He said the protesters should cease and desist. Minister of Justice Anibal Fernandez, another major GOA spokesman, quickly jumped into the fray, asserting the roadblock was illegal. The head of the National Institute of Industrial Technology (INTI), Enrique Martinez, said INTI had been monitoring air and water quality upstream and downstream of the Botnia plant but had no evidence of contamination beyond acceptable levels.

¶4. (SBU) Former president Nestor Kirchner announced January 15 that he and his government had "never" supported the roadblocks protesting the Botnia paper mill. Kirchner's revisionism was instantly challenged by media reports of his 2006 visit to Gualeguaychu, when he encouraged the environmentalists to pursue their protest and called it a "national cause."

15. (U) The San Martin bridge at Gualeguaychu -- the closest to Buenos Aires and heretofore the primary border crossing between Argentina and Uruguay -- remains closed to traffic after over two years. The protesters failed over the January 17-18 weekend to deliver on their threats to shut down either of the other two bridges upstream from Gualeguaychu, as they have sporadically done over the last two years. Although the GOA has now made clear its opposition to the Gualeguaychu roadblock and called it illegal, its reversal remains rhetorical, as it does not appear inclined to use security forces to re-open the bridge.

16. (SBU) Comment: The GOA's change of heart on the Gualeguaychu protest may be in recognition of its futility and the damage it has caused local businesses and Argentine travellers. There has also been some speculation that the GOA reversal may be an effort to repair damaged ties with Uruguay and win GOU support (per reftel) for Nestor Kirchner's bid for the secretary general position at the helm of the new UNASUR bloc of South American nations.

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